DO NOT WORRY
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Psalm 96:1–9
Philippians 4:4–9
Matthew 6:25–34

"Do not worry about anything."
Philippians 4:6 (NRSV)

Like every believer I know, my search for real life has led me through at least three distinct seasons of faith. Jesus called them finding life, losing life, and finding life again, with the paradoxical promise that finders will be losers while those who lose their lives for his sake will wind up finding them again. You do not have to die to discover the truth of this teaching. You only need to lose track of who you are, or who you thought you were supposed to be, so that you end up lying flat on the dirt floor basement of your heart.
Do this, Jesus says, and you will live.

Barbara Brown Taylor
Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith

Do not worry about tomorrow? Of course we're worried. Not a one of us is unaffected by what has transpired in the past few weeks. We've watched American financial icons totter, fall, and disappear. We've watched property values and personal resources decline. The morning paper and CNN continue to deliver what seems like an endless stream of bad news.

To all of this the entirely understandable personal response is stress, anxiety, fear. The *Chicago Tribune, New York Times,* and *Today Show* all reported recently on a new survey conducted by the American Psychological Association that revealed that stress levels are close to an all-time high. Eight out of ten of us are seriously stressed, worried about job loss, lower income, ability to pay bills and feed our families. Nanette Molitor, a psychologist in Wilmette, told a reporter that in her twenty years of practice, she has never seen such anxiety. The *Tribune* asked people how they were coping with stress: 36 percent are drinking alcohol; 26 percent are praying; 25 percent are shopping.

Stress comes from worrying about a future we cannot control. We are very good at it, actually. Frederick Buechner says somewhere that he can always imagine the worst that could possibly happen—a headache must be a brain tumor; your teenager is late, so you're sure something terrible has happened. The father of stress research, Hans Selye, taught that there is good stress. It stimulates us to plan ahead, to be prepared, to save our money, and to take care of ourselves. Chronic stress, he taught, is another thing altogether. It can be debilitating, paralyzing, and very unhealthy.

Part of the dynamic—and the problem—here is that we are created with a wonderful system of physiological responses that allow us to respond immediately and efficiently to threat. It is called the fight-or-flight syndrome. It allowed our ancestors to deal with threats by fighting them off or by fleeing. It's an amazing system: the body goes on four-alarm, call-out-all-the-troops alert. Heart and lungs go into overdrive, arteries and capillaries expand, eyes widen, blood is diverted from digestion, which virtually stops, and is sent to muscles. It is a great system if you are under attack. It is not so great if you are sitting in traffic and the driver next to you cuts you off or if you're reading the Dow Jones and watching your money, your future security, disappear.

Research done with urban police officers revealed that their fight-or-flight syndrome is activated regularly, sometimes five or six times a day. It takes several hours, by the way, for the system to reverse itself and settle down. That never happens for many police officers and others. Instead, people arrive home to join their spouse, partner, family, for dinner with their digestive system turned off and their body ready to do battle. The physiological, emotional, and relational results are not pretty. Returning combat veterans have been living with this fight-or-flight system fully activated all day, every day, and come home wounded, hurting psychologically.

Stress, we are told, is at an all-time high. Stress, we know, can be harmful to your health and ultimately fatal. And so when someone says, "Don't worry about anything," we should probably pay attention and find out what he or she means before we dismiss it as silliness.

St. Paul said it:

> Rejoice in the Lord always. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God.

Actually, Paul had a lot to worry about. He's in prison. He knows that he will never see his dear friends in the little Christian community in Philippi again. Rome, he knows, will in all probability execute him, which is what happened. You might expect him to say near the end to the last letter he wrote, "Get ready, be prepared, plan for your defense or escape. Something terrible may happen at any moment." Instead, "Rejoice," he says. "The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything."

Jesus said the same thing one time: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, drink or wear. . . . Look at the birds. Are you not of more value than they? Your father knows that you need all these things. . . . Strive first for the kingdom."

First, what this does not mean. By all accounts Paul was a high-energy, hardworking tentmaker, traveler, preacher, organizer. Paul was hardly nonchalant about the future. Jesus must have taken over his father Joseph's building business and carpenter shop and spent years providing for his mother and brothers and sisters. So this does not mean lazy irresponsibility. Besides, look at the birds, which I love to do. So far as I can see they are busy all day long, from sunup to sundown, taking care of business.

What Paul and Jesus meant was that it is such a sad and unhealthy waste of the precious gift of life to spend it being anxious, worrying about things we cannot control—like the stock market. It is, Barbara Brown Taylor says, a form of idolatry to give your fears and anxieties the power and authority to shape who you are and to drive your behavior. That's what Jesus and Paul meant: created to be beloved and joyful children of God, it is such a waste to become anxious, fearful worriers. What will save you, Jesus and Paul meant, is not your economic resources, your savings accounts and 401(k)s; not your physical strength; not your defense system, your fences, and weapons; not your hard work. Nonstop, 24/7 clergy, too, need to hear Jesus say, "It won't save you, make you whole." What will save you is God's love. Nothing else—nothing but the love of God from which nothing can ever separate you.

There are coping mechanisms. If you simply cannot stop worrying, there are things to do. Dr. Herbert Benson, who taught at Harvard Medical School, wrote a valuable little book, *The Relaxation Response,* that teaches the ancient practice of deep breathing as a way to counter high stress. Nothing is better than exercise, taking a walk, to regularize breathing, and interestingly, Dr. Benson advises the ancient Christian practice of "breath prayer": one phrase on

inhaling, “Lord Jesus Christ”; the second phrase on exhaling, “have mercy on me.” So if your stress is consuming you, do take care of yourself. Breathe deeply, exercise, pray—with thanksgiving, as Paul advised.

What the Bible means here is a life-giving, life-saving reordering of priorities. It was Lee Iacocca, I think, who coined the phrase “Don’t sweat the small stuff.” It’s what Jesus and Paul meant.

I’ve been known to get a little stressed in traffic, particularly when other drivers are rude and aggressive. If truth were told, behind the wheel, with a powerful engine under the hood, it calls forth in me similar behavior. Cut me off, and I’m inclined to do unto you what you just did to me. So I was delighted to happen upon a little essay with the wonderful title “Be Cool to the Pizza Dude.” It’s in *This I Believe,* a collection of NPR interviews and is by Sarah Adams, an English Professor at Olympia College. She writes,

> Coolness to the pizza delivery dude is a practice in humility and forgiveness. I let him cut me off in traffic, let him safely hit the exit ramp from the left lane, let him forget to use his blinker without extending any of my fingers out the window—I let it go. After all, the dude is delivering pizza to young and old, families and singletons, gays and straights, blacks, whites, and browns, rich and poor, vegetarians and meat lovers alike. As he journeys, I give safe passage, practice restraint, show courtesy, and contain my anger. (*This I Believe*, pp. 7–9)

So much of that happens every day. And it is an act of maturity and health and finally spiritual trust to let it go. It is an expression, at the deepest level, to stop worrying and trust God with our lives.

Two years ago I told the story of a good friend of mine, Bill Forbes, a Presbyterian minister who had just been diagnosed with a very serious illness. He was not expected to live long, and he wrote a letter to his many friends in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It was a lovely and helpful letter, and I read from it two years ago.

Bill didn’t die. I saw him at the meeting of our General Assembly this last summer. Blessed with a wonderful sense of humor, anticipating that his many friends would be thinking, if not asking, “Are you still here?” he wrote us all another letter.

“My docs are baffled,” he wrote. “I told them it was the power of prayer, reasonable eating habits, exercise, massage, a little snake oil here and there, and a wicked sense of humor.”

“I didn’t expect to be here and to write another letter.”

“What have I learned? And then Bill told us—

> Each day is a gift.
> The greatest gift we can give to each other is encouragement.
> Don’t sweat the small stuff.
> Prayer shapes my life as never before.

At the end of his letter the pastor became pastoral. Bill wrote,

> None of us knows how many days we will be granted. As you look in the mirror each day, take time to marvel that you have been created in the image of God [and that you are still here]. Count your blessings. Smile more and frown less. Tell those you love how much you love them. Share yourself abundantly—give thanks—keep a twinkle in your eye . . . and laugh.

That sounds a lot like what another pastor wrote to his friends 2,000 years ago:

> Rejoice in the Lord always. . . . Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God.

And so hear the word of God today, for you:

> The Lord is near.
> Do not worry about anything.

It can save your life.

Amen.